

José Manuel Durão Barroso

President of the European Commission

**Statement by President Barroso
following his meeting with Navi Pillay,
United Nations High Commissioner for
Human Rights**

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Press point

Brussels, 23 February 2011

Good afternoon Ladies and Gentlemen,

I have had a very good meeting with the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Navi Pillay. I congratulated her on the very important work that she and her office are doing on these very important issues.

I have also highlighted the central place of human rights in the European project, both within the EU and in its external action.

I have praised the important work of the High Commissioner in promoting Human Rights and also the crucial importance of the United Nations for this agenda. I know how much the Secretary General Ban Ki-moon is personally committed to this agenda of human rights.

Of course we also seized the occasion to discuss current events in North Africa, which was also the main topic of this morning's College meeting.

I want to be very clear. We cannot afford to be passive spectators of events which are historic in many aspects. Ultimately this is about people's deep quest for freedom, justice, dignity, social and economic opportunities, and democracy.

These are indeed universal values. I believe that every human being from whatever culture has the same aspirations for freedom. Every human being, if he or she has the opportunity, will choose freedom. That is precisely what the young people in these countries are showing us.

Let's be frank about these issues. Some people expressed in the past moral prejudice about Arab culture, saying "do Arabs really care about democracy". I think young people of those countries are showing that they do not want dictatorships. So the message we have to send to those countries and to the young people is that we are with them in their fight for human dignity, human rights and democracy. This is an historic moment and we have to be on the right side of history. This is a life time opportunity to assist those who are in the pursuit of freedom, justice, democracy and human rights.

We have the instruments and means to support that fight.

The Commission is bringing together a support package to assist the transition to democracy, human rights and judicial reforms, education and job creation. We will do it through our existing instruments (for instance the European Neighbourhood Partnership Instrument, the Instrument for Stability, the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights; vocational training programmes just to name a few). We can also do it in supporting the actions of the office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights of the United Nations. Today we had a very important discussion on these matters – how we can support people, namely directly the civil societies. It is important to engage with governments. Sometimes we need to engage with governments that are not our "preferred" ones, but at the same time we have to be sure that we are able to address the concerns of the peoples.

Regarding Libya, I want to make a very clear statement. I think it is intolerable to see the army using force against civilians as we have been seeing during the last days. This is simply intolerable and I think we have to demand from the Libyan authorities very clearly that they stop violence, tell them that repression is not the solution and that we will support the aspirations of the Libyan people.